

## MEMORANDUM

TO: All Priest and Deacons

FROM: Most Reverend Richard. E. Pates

RE: Care of Souls and Forgiveness of Sins during Coronavirus Pandemic

DATE: March 22, 2020

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Across the world, our people have raised questions regarding the forgiveness of sins. In order to address these inquiries and to bring peace to the victims of coronavirus and their caregivers, the Apostolic Penitentiary of the Vatican recently released two documents. They are:

- Note from the Apostolic Penitentiary on the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the current pandemic, 20-03-2020
- Decree of the Apostolic Penitentiary and the granting of special indulgences to the faithful in the current pandemic, 20-03-2020

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has produced an aide for the Church in the United States to assist in implementing the guidelines of the documentation from the Apostolic Penitentiary. This aide follows.

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### **THE CARE OF SOULS AND THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS DURING THIS PANDEMIC - -**

The necessary and prudent measures enacted by government officials to prevent and slow infection rates during this current pandemic come with a great many sacrifices. As in all areas of life, these measures also affect the Church in her mission for the care of souls. The faithful have been overwhelmingly understanding in adapting to the restrictions of public gatherings and the temporary cessation of public Masses by attending Eucharistic celebrations virtually and participating in spiritual communion.

Another crucial aspect of the spiritual life is the forgiveness of sins, which is ordinarily accomplished through individual and integral confession to a priest followed by individual absolution. The current pandemic and the measures taken to combat it make this very difficult.

Therefore, the following instructions have been issued by the Holy See (Apostolic Penitentiary):

- the diocesan bishop is to indicate to priests and penitents the prudent attentions to be adopted in the individual celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation. These should include assuring that proper precautions are made in terms of appropriate distancing, that

it occurs in a well-ventilated area, such as outside the confessional, the use of protective masks, and while always assuring protection of the seal of confession. Governmental guidelines limiting the number of people who may gather in the same public place, including a church or chapel, need to be adhered to as well. *[Given the “stay in place” order of Governor Pritzker, it is best to suspend the Sacrament of Penance at this time. In the event of a dying parishioner at home, every precaution needs to be taken with regard to administering this sacrament. In reference to hospices, hospitals, etc. priority must be given to the direction of the responsible health care professionals.]*

- the diocesan bishop can, in the current situation, determine that the circumstances in his territory warrant the use of the third form of the Rite of Penance, often called “general absolution.” However, this form necessitates a gathering of people. Given restrictions on public gatherings, the diocesan bishop could grant permission for those areas where such a gathering is already in place, such as in a hospital ward “where the infected faithful are in danger of death.” This would require some explanation on the part of the priest to the penitents as to how they can participate in the rite. It would also require that all prudent measures be made so that the penitents can hear the absolution (such as a public address system). *[In the Diocese of Joliet, permission for a celebration of the third form of the Sacrament of Penance is granted as long as the direction of the Apostolic Penitentiary is followed.]*

However, given public restrictions, the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation with either individual or general absolution may not be possible. This will make some of the faithful anxious, especially during this Lenten season of penance.

To help in this, the Holy See, through the Apostolic Penitentiary, has offered two recourses for the faithful:

a) “Where the individual faithful find themselves in the painful impossibility of receiving sacramental absolution, it should be remembered that perfect contrition, coming from the love of God, beloved above all things, expressed by a sincere request for forgiveness (that which the penitent is at present able to express) and accompanied by *votum confessionis*, that is, by the firm resolution to have recourse, as soon as possible, to sacramental confession, obtains forgiveness of sins, even mortal ones (cf. CCC, no. 1452).”

- perfect contrition requires
  - the love of God
  - the sincere desire for forgiveness
  - the ardent commitment to receive the sacrament of reconciliation when available

b) “The gift of special Indulgences is granted to the faithful suffering from COVID-19 disease, commonly known as Coronavirus, as well as to health care workers, family members and all those who in any capacity, including through prayer, care for them.”

- this is a time of suffering, especially for those who have contracted COVID-19. As such, it may be a time for us to “rediscover ‘the same redemptive suffering of Christ’ (Salvifici doloris, 30).” Trusting in Christ,

- a Plenary indulgence is “granted to the faithful suffering from Coronavirus, who are subject to quarantine by order of the health authority in hospitals or in their own homes if, with a spirit detached from any sin, they unite spiritually through the media to the celebration of Holy Mass, the recitation of the Holy Rosary, to the pious practice of the Way of the Cross or other forms of devotion, or if at least they will recite the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and a pious invocation to the Blessed Virgin Mary, offering this trial in a spirit of faith in God and charity towards their brothers and sisters, with the will to fulfil the usual conditions (sacramental confession, Eucharistic communion and prayer according to the Holy Father's intentions), as soon as possible.”

- “Health care workers, family members and all those who, following the example of the Good Samaritan, exposing themselves to the risk of contagion, care for the sick of Coronavirus according to the words of the divine Redeemer: ‘Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends’ (Jn 15: 13), will obtain the same gift of the Plenary Indulgence under the same conditions.”

- o An indulgence is “the expression of the Church's full confidence of being heard by the Father when - in view of Christ's merits and, by his gift, those of Our Lady and the saints - she asks him to mitigate or cancel the painful aspect of punishment by fostering its medicinal aspect through other channels of grace” (John Paul II, General Audience, September 29, 1999).

- o A plenary indulgence removes all the temporal punishment due to sin (CCC, 1471).

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## **Conclusion of Bishop Pates**

Two priorities should be exercised in our care for the victims and their families with regard to the forgiveness of sins and indulgences.

1. Accommodations should always be made to help healthcare workers. They are under enormous stress, often with scant resources. Thus, we must abide by their direction.
2. Compassion and sensitivity should characterize our outreach to those presently sick. As the foregoing illustrates, we are doing what we can to provide sacramental ministry under highly difficult circumstances.

To be emphasized above all, is that our God is a loving and caring God who always exercises mercy on our behalf. Thank you again for your leadership and example in promoting the “staying in place” directive of Governor Pritzker. Be assured of my prayers and strong support at this time.